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ABSTRACT

The Puerto Rican language-culture nexus is seen as the natural field where young Puerto Ricans forge their ethnic identities. Ethnographic theory and methods were used to study this nexus from a naturalistic perspective. A focus group of 12 Puerto Rican 8th grade students (9 males and 3 females) attending a school within 1 Puerto Rican barrio in Cleveland (Ohio) was used. The students were from 13 to 17 years old. Although their parents were all bilingual-Spanish dominant or monolingual in Spanish, two students were monolingual in Spanish, two used English solely, and eight were basically bilingual. The study used an open-ended inquiry process that was characterized by a constant search for the actors' interpretation of their own behavior, beliefs, values, and self-perception. Focus was on exploring whether and how ethnic identity structures educational outcomes by assessing students' personal and cultural history, family, community, and society. Theoretical and methodological questions and recommendations about acculturation processes and school achievement of young Puerto Rican students in mainland America are summarized. Analytical categorizations of different personality types are included. Each student was located on a particular point within the cultural/linguistic continuum. Students continually struggled to adapt and maintain their identities. Included are 11 references. (RLC)

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ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AS PERCEIVED BY A GROUP OF SELECTED MAINLAND PUERTO RICAN STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

The Puerto Rican language-culture nexus is treated in this paper as the natural field where young Puerto Ricans forge their ethnic identities. Ethnographic theory and methods were the tools used to study the phenomenon from a naturalistic perspective. This was an open-ended inquiry process, characterized by a constant search for the actors' interpretation of their own behavior, beliefs, values, and self-perception. Ethnic identity and school achievement were studied in relation to individual students and their behavior. Special consideration was given to their personal and cultural history, family, community and society. This paper provides a summary of theoretical and methodological questions and recommendations about acculturation processes and school achievement of young Puerto Rican students in the mainland U.S.A. The analytical categorization presented appears relevant to educators and other practitioners working with this and other undeserved ethnic urban communities.

PURPOSE

The main purpose of this study was to explore whether and how ethnic identity structures educational outcome among a selected group of mainland Puerto Rican students. The initial research questions were: 1. Is their ethnic identity a concern for the students?; 2. How assimilated are the students into the American society?; and 3. How do their ethnic identities relate to their school achievement?

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Ethnic identity was approached from a psychodynamic perspective. Special attention was given to ethnic groups boundary-maintaining behavior as conceptualized by Barth (1969).

The language-ethnic continuum as described by Bickerton (1975) and Drumond (1980) was utilized as a guide for the study of the Puerto Rican ethno-linguistic experience in the mainland. From this approach the group was not seen as a homogeneous mass of individuals, but as a more or less wider range of individuals exhibiting a spectrum of the symbolic elements (e.g. language, place of birth, religion, genealogy) associated with an ethnic status (Gaines, 1988). Lev Vygotsky (1979) developmental approach was incorporated with the conceptualization of the ethnic-linguistic continuum into the study's theoretical model. Based on these approaches, bilingualism and biculturalism were assumed to be positive signs of adaptation. It was hypothesized that students who were incorporating certain aspects of the new culture while maintaining their ethnic identity would have had a positive school experience.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic theory and methods were the tools used to study the phenomenon from a naturalistic perspective. This was an open ended inquiry process, characterized by a constant search for the actors' interpretation of their own behavior, beliefs, and values. Participant observation was the central technique utilized for the collection of data, and it was complemented by intensive interviewing.

The relationship between ethnic identity and achievement in school, was analyzed as it was experienced by a group of young

mainland Puerto Rican students. Data collection was concentrated in a focus group that met for six months. Group sessions were tape recorded and later transcribed. Interventions in one or other language were registered as they were used. The back translation method was used to translate from Spanish to English. The original language was kept, and the translation was given next to it in parentheses.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Due to the nature of the phenomenon and the qualitative methodology used, theoretical sampling was chosen as the sampling technique for this research. The field work took place in the larger of two Puerto Rican barrios in Cleveland, Ohio. A focus group made up by 12 Puerto Rican 8th grade students attending a school located within the geographical boundaries of the barrio served as the main source of data.

All 12 group members self-identified as Puerto Rican. They ranged from 13 to 17 years of age. Nine of them were male and three were female. In terms of language usage patterns, although their parents were all bilingual-Spanish dominant or monolingual in Spanish, only two students were monolingual in Spanish. Two students used English solely, and the rest were basically bilingual with an observed tendency to use only English within the school environment. Their migration patterns ranged from mainland born (New York, New Jersey, West Virginia, and Cleveland) to recent arrivals from the island. While 11 out of 12 mothers were present

in the household, most of the fathers were in fact step-fathers. Seven families were public assistance recipients.

Three-fourths (9) of the group members had been identified as "dropout prone" by the Bilingual Multicultural Dropout Prevention Project which operated at the school. The screening process took place at the beginning of the 1988-1989 school year, using a five indicators cumulative screening scale.

Due to human subjects research issues, students were asked to choose a fictitious name to be used instead of theirs. Their chosen names were: Alvaro, Alejandro, Ernesto, Esteban, Irene, Javier, Jorge, María, Omar, Ramón, Roberto, and Ysabel.

DATA COLLECTION

Participant observation and intensive interviewing were the central techniques utilized for the collection of data. Participant observation was the initial technique used to gather data about the focus group as a whole and about its individual members.

The same group operated as a support group for four months, at the beginning of the data collection phase the group transformed itself into a focus group. Group members actively participated in the selection of topics for discussion related to the main concepts of this study: Puerto Rican ethnic identity and school achievement. With the students' consent the sessions were tape recorded.

Due to the semi-structured nature of the group sessions, other instances of school life were observed to complement the

group sessions transcriptions. They included field trips, sharing a table in the school cafeteria, attending a basketball game, or simply "hanging out in the hallways."

Unstructured or intensive interviews were conducted with the students, and some key school personnel. Intensive interviewing complemented and were complemented by participant observation. Lofland and Loafland (1984) speak of the mutuality of these two techniques.

Spanish and English were used interchangeably according to whichever language was more comfortable to the group member or the informant. There was a constant acceptance of "Spanglish"; "loan words" from one or the other language were registered as they were used. The "back translation" method was used to maintain the accuracy of the data, and to "decenter" the language (Rogler, 1989).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was constant during the study. It started with the selection of the problem and it ended with the writing of the final report. Once the data were collected, the analysis phase began in a more systematic fashion. Looking for patterns was the technique used to compare, contrast, and sort pieces of information into categories and minutiae until a discernible thought or behavior became identifiable. This process started with the development of a filing system where the data was stored. Once patterns were identified, they constituted an emergent coding

scheme for the data to be compared to the guiding theoretical model.

FINDINGS

From the research findings it is possible to surmise that to become bilingual and bicultural was an ideal, almost Utopic, situation within the students' environment. Each student was located in a particular point within the described cultural/linguistic continuum. None of them had arrived at an ideal cultural/linguistic Nirvana. Their struggle to adapt and to maintain their identities appeared to have been ever present.

The following research findings summarize an initial response to the original research questions:

1. Students' ethnic identities. The students repeatedly mentioned "el idioma" (Puerto Rican Spanish) as the most important ethnic identifier, making them Puerto Rican. They were proud of their "idioma"; therefore, they were proud of who they were. They spoke about language as the most powerful element making them different from other students. "El idioma", as Alvaro described it, was language and culture to them.

2. Assimilation to the new society. In their efforts to conform to the host society some of the students started to lose their parents' language. In its place they started to acquire the urban English dialect most frequently spoken by their native English speaking classmates.

Students who were switching into "English-only" were seen

as less Puerto Rican by their ingroup peers and were more accepted by outgroup peers. Most of the students, however, were maintaining Spanish as they were incorporating English.

3. Ethnic identity and school achievement. This was a linguistic and cultural group. Ethnic identity was not separated from school achievement. Students were attempting to solve their ethnic/cultural dilemma at the same time that were participating in a formal learning process. The findings appeared to show a relationship between ethnic identity and achievement in school for these Puerto Rican students.

They were all facing the same dilemma: To keep their "idioma"/culture or to embrace the urban English dialect of their non-Hispanic peers. They were facing the paradox of maintaining a defined Puerto Rican ethnic identity or incorporating the culture of the host society. They were confronting a no win situation, either choice meant losing something. To embrace the new culture implied the rejection of certain values of their own culture. Their parents and the rest of their extended family were part of that old culture. The most immediate reward from embracing the new culture was the acceptance of their non-Puerto Rican classmates. Through group discussions it became apparent that this was an existential choice. A question that very young men and women were wrestling with alone.

In that process they had developed a sibling like relationship. They had a clear sense of kinship with their fellow Puertorriqueños. The ethnic group provided them a refuge against

a hostile, uncaring environment. Like a family, the ethnic peers demanded loyalty and sacrifice. This Puerto Rican group had its sagas of heroes, martyrs, victims, and victors.

ANALYTICAL CATEGORIZATION

Although the students were all Puerto Rican, differences were found in terms of migration histories; skin color; socialization and language usage patterns; family composition; and school achievement levels. Based on these differences, students were grouped in five analytical categories: 1. the warriors, 2. the troubadour, 3. the lawyers, 4. the traders, and 5. the poets. The warriors (Jorge, Ramón, Alvaro, and Alejandro) were bilingual Spanish/English dialect. They had a strong ethnic identity and a low school achievement. The troubadour (Omar) was almost monolingual in English urban dialect. He had a diffused ethnic identity, and low school achievement. The lawyers (Roberto and Javier) were bilingual Spanish/English. They didn't have a strong ethnic identity, and had a high school achievement. The traders (Esteban and María) were bilingual Spanish/English dialect. They had a defined ethnic identity, and average school performance. The poets (Irene, Ernesto, and Ysabel) were Spanish monolingual, had a strong ethnic identity, and a low school achievement.

As these analytical categories illustrate, group members were arrayed along the entire language-culture continuum. In the Spanish end of the continuum, there was the Puerto Rican Spanish, or "el idioma" as the students preferred to call it.

The poets were the only ones who were able to speak "el idioma" in its purest form. They were untouched by innercity's culture and dialects. They resisted the idea of speaking English. They functioned well in bilingual classes, where English and Spanish were used. They were having a very difficult time functioning in classes where the teacher was monolingual in English (not only linguistically but also culturally).

The traders were able to maintain their own identity and some language skills while incorporating inner-city English and culture. They didn't want to impress anyone. They were achieving at their level. Their grades were average or above average. They were practical people, to a degree, they were like chameleons.

The lawyers had less contact with their African American classmates and therefore their English was not as "cool" as they would have liked it to be. Academically, they were doing fine. Their Spanish was not very strong. In most cases it was rapidly deteriorating. They were having some problems with other Puerto Rican students who considered them "asimilados". Specifically they were clashing with the warriors.

The warriors were able to speak Spanish and English quite fluently. Their English, however, was not as close to standard English as was the lawyers'. They had incorporated American urban cultural traits without losing a strong sense of who they were. They have maintained strong ties with their Puerto Rican peers while interacting with students from other groups, such as Appalachian and African American. They were proud of being Puerto

Rican and they expressed it. Their situation appeared to be the ideal one, but it was not. They were channeling their need to maintain their distinctiveness through behaviors perceived as negative by the school.

The warriors were achieving the difficult task of reconciling the two cultures and languages. They were not receiving support from the adults in the school. They were having a difficult time adjusting to the school norms. It appeared that impersonal norms and regulations were not reaching them. They were inclined to use violence as a means to solve problems. This was one of the indicators or assimilation to the new society. Gangs and fights were a major component of the innercity culture they were entering to.

The troubadour. Omar's case was different, he had slipped out of the language/culture continuum. The other group members have labeled him as an "asimilado". In reality he didn't appear to have been assimilated, or at least he didn't appear to be enjoying the benefits of assimilation. He spoke almost exclusively English dialect. He was white looking, and naturally, he was confused.

Using Drumond's ethnic linguistic model was possible to place these different subgroups within a Puerto Rican/Spanish and American/English continuum. The continuum had however many different lairs.

Puerto Ricans and Latinos in general, with their growing presence in this society are questioning the validity of the traditional American approach to ethnicity and race. Ethnic and

cultural identities are richer and more complex than the traditional bipolar black and white approach. Latinos are already making a contribution. The school and society in general must start listening and adjusting for the changes to come.

The fact remained that Puerto Ricans as a group had a comparative lower school attainment. The data presented in this study illustrated that there is a constellation of possible reasons why Puerto Rican students are achieving below their potential. Most of the students were navigating through a stormy sea of challenges.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

These findings clearly questioned the classical post-war approach to acculturation. Changes in this country's economy and society have created a type of ghetto poverty that systematically deprived large numbers of people of opportunity of advancing socially and economically. What this linguistic/cultural group had was precisely their culture as their strength to deal with the challenges of innercity life.

These findings also questioned the validity of the assimilation process as a means of advancement in society. From a developmental approach the students must be allowed and encouraged to maintain their language and culture as assets in their development. The more monolingual mainland Puerto Rican students become the more chances there are that they will loose their culture.

In this country's Northeast and Midwest regions, from

where these students come and where most Puerto Ricans reside, the dramatic post-industrial social and economic changes are more evident than in other parts of the country. Assimilation could mean giving up those tools from the group's culture that will provide the needed support for these challenging times. The challenge is how to direct those existing tools towards the full achievement of their potential.

There is a need to recognize that the U.S.A. is turning willingly or unwillingly into a multicultural society. All actors count, all players are needed. A sincere effort to recognize them and to know who they are cannot be avoided.

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